



Welcome Back: The Humanities as Civic Education

Citation

Sommer, Doris. 2011. Welcome back: the humanities as civic education. The Journal of Comparative Literature at Dartmouth College 2011:80-89.

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:10886846>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Welcome Back: The Humanities As Civic Education

by Doris Sommer

When Larry Summers was still President of Harvard University, I dusted off a practical, and venerable, defense of the arts and humanities which were already feeling vulnerable even in elite universities. "You know a lot about Latin America," I began. "Yes I do," he agreed. "Imagine being elected mayor of Bogotá, Colombia, in 1995, then the most violent, corrupt, and chaotic city in the hemisphere. What would you do?" Larry thought it over: Economic stimulation wouldn't work in that chaos, because new investments would end up in the pockets of drug dealers. More armed police wouldn't work either, because corrupt police were also in the dealers' pockets and would raise the level of violence. Conventional remedies were useless, he admitted. And then Larry said, uncharacteristically, that he didn't know what he would have done. That's when I told him about Bogotá's brilliant Mayor Antanas Mockus, who tackled otherwise intractable situations by thinking like an artist—"What would an artist do?"—and like a humanist—"When you are stuck, re-interpret." The effects reduced homicides by 70%, traffic accidents by more than half, and tripled tax revenues to the city. Larry was impressed. I hope that you will be too, not only with artists who promote positive change from the top, but also with those who work from the bottom up, like Augusto Boal. Both are *maestros*. Are you ready to be an apprentice?

First Stop

Someone from the audience shouts "Stop!" We are watching the re-play of a tragedy written and performed by non-actors, about their most urgent problem: a teenager banished from home because he has AIDS, for example; or a strike busted by armed police; or a child separated from parents at an illegal border crossing. The one-act performance by implicated players who script and stage the disaster prepares a re-play that invites you to propose changes, not abstractly in discussion, but by acting them out. One by one, *spect-actors* stop the action, get up from their seats, step onto the stage, and replace one of the characters to change something in the script. They set off improvisations by other characters that may derail the circle of trouble and tragedy. At least they interfere in the downward spiral long enough for

someone to get a good idea.¹ Each interruption, in Augusto Boal's "Forum Theater," puts the play into crisis, which means a turning point where danger meets opportunity. Tragedy can lose its way when clever variations twist a plot away from inevitable catastrophe onto constructive sidetracks. Those tracks can lead practically everywhere when creative risks engage technical know-how to pioneer treatment for AIDS, adjust labor relations, develop psychotherapy, and legislate new laws.² This is how Boal staged the ripple effects of art into other, altered, fields.³

Attention to art's work in the world had been a centerpiece of humanistic education in classical times, reviving in the renaissance; it was the foundation of the first modern university in 1810, and it continued to wax and wane until a recent but prolonged and pessimistic slump. About fifty years ago (I simplify of course), instrumental effects of art became anathema to many humanists in retreat from a nasty post-war world of aggressive interests. To safeguard aesthetic freedom, beauty, and selflessness, the humanities left behind the risky optimism that drives civic responsibility and education. Art's purposelessness became the watermark of its authenticity. Defenders of art for art's sake invoked Emmanuel Kant to ground this disinterested appreciation for beauty. But using Kant to cut out purpose truncates his ambitious project. It was finally a civic project in which purposelessness was a first moment on the way toward new moments of agreement about collective purpose.⁴ The way is indirect, his student Friedrich Schiller insisted against demands by apparently more practical people who were nevertheless making a mess of the French Revolution. Freedom and reason need to detour from headstrong politics and allow the imagination to play, to pause for disinterested judgment, and then to "court agreement."

Today, a new generation of humanists is poised to recover oblique paths from artistic freedom to the public good. Leading back and forth from creativity to civic purpose, the paths develop novel entry points, routes, and detours, because getting from inspiration to practical effects is part of artistic agency. These moves deserve more research and reflection to raise expectations for more cases and to cull the lessons learned. Together with artists who create interventions, scholars become Cultural Agents when they attend to art as "our greatest renewable resource" for addressing the world's fundamental challenges of disease, violence, and poverty.⁵ They join a still-spotty but spirited movement called Public Humanities that explores what civics means for liberal education.⁶ By spotting connections among effective though disparate art projects, scholars and teachers can contribute to art's effects.

Consider, for example, what connects Boal's interactive theater with Antanas Mockus's government. An exemplary educator, Mockus was twice mayor of Bogotá (1995-97, 2001-2004) and a strong presidential candidate in 2010. For him, Colombia's capital was a classroom where education enlisted art. Bogotá had taken a chance on the improvised politician—a philosopher, mathematician, and former Chancellor of Colombia's National University who admits to thinking like an artist. But his first month in office went by with no noteworthy news, and the mayor risked forfeiting a fragile hope that change was possible. What could he do in a city too corrupt for conventional solutions? This was no rhetorical question for Mockus, but an incentive to stop the action and resort to art. His first spectacular move was to retire the corrupt traffic police and replace them with a small troop of pantomime artists who trained more mimes, including many of the disgraced policemen. In a city where hardly anyone had made eye-contact with fellow citizens for over a decade, the pleasant surprise of clowns directing traffic had people laughing, commenting, and appreciating the rule of red lights and crosswalks. Deaths by motor vehicle accidents decreased by more than half. Much of the credit should go to his knack for making art, only reluctantly acknowledged much later.⁷ Without art, the mimes would not have materialized; nor would many other daring examples of public performance have helped to bring Bogotá back to civic life. Learning to expect art as a necessary partner in development is part of the lesson to take away. It keeps art's resources in focus for future projects, sending out more ripples to potential artists.

Alongside the spectacular performances of great artists like Boal, who press on grass roots issues to get "melt-up" effects (think also about Venezuela's José Abreu whose phenomenal *Sistema* of massive classical music education develops civic cooperation), and together with the impressive moves from the top where Mockus works (also Albanian Mayor Edi Rama who had citizens paint ugly housing facades into public art-works which helped to revive the capital), there are also everyday cultural agents (teachers, parents, journalists, clergy) who can train us to expect art in ourselves and in others. We are all potential artists for educational reformer John Dewey, because we make the world while we engage with it. America's foremost pragmatist philosopher during the country's worst depression, Dewey refreshed appreciation for art's usefulness. In his user-friendly development of weighty tradition, Dewey combined German aesthetic philosophy with American common sense to direct education towards creativity and pleasure to spark personal and public growth.

Out of Bounds

The variety projects that I mentioned (interactive theater, traffic mimes, youth orchestras, poster blitz, painting the town), among many others, share a family resemblance.⁸ They begin as works of art that arrest attention to particular issues but they don't stop there.⁹ Instead, they send ripple effects into extra-artistic institutions and practices. The particular achievement of cultural agency is to trigger constructive change (in law, medicine, crime prevention, economic development) with the disruptive energy called art. These are necessarily hybrid projects, hitching stale and unproductive patterns to the motor of unconventional interventions. The mixed media of unpredictable art and extra-artistic institutions that together compose cultural agency obviously don't fit into standard fields of study. On the one hand, social sciences may recognize effective programs, but will probably overlook art as a partner to economic, legal, or healthcare advances, and therefore will miss a motor of social effectiveness. And on the other hand, humanists are still likely to bypass social effects while they attend to artistic value.

Stop! We are repeating a tragedy in which spect-actors on both the practical and aesthetic sides of the theater witness a doubly damaging disencounter. Social development needs the innovation and judgment that the arts cultivate; and the arts thrive on social challenges that throw systems into crisis. It is time to step up on stage and acknowledge the hybridity of worthwhile projects. It is also time to theorize their family resemblance in order to recognize and support new projects. Aesthetics can be a first move, as it was when Kant and Schiller wrote on the backdrop of the French Revolution. Political freedom needed to take a disinterested detour through beauty and art to prepare new ground for us all to enjoy and to cultivate. But aesthetics won't be the last step.

Art in the sense I am using the word is close to Dewey's definition of intense experience that sparks more exploration and experience. His line of thought developed from Schiller's *Aesthetic Education* (1794) and identified all active citizens as creative artists. This was radical in the eighteenth century and again in the 1930s, when Dewey helped to inspire FDR's massive employment programs for painters, actors, writers, and musicians. Today, the line that links art to liberty is recovered by political philosopher Jacques Rancière who defends an "aesthetic regime" in politics; that is, an awareness that human life is made up of artificial constructions that should be continually adjusted with more and broader-based art-making.

A Start

Ripple Effects ties this interpretive tradition to particular arts projects that merit sustained recognition and reflection: creative works, on grand and small scales, that morph into institutional innovation. It is a humanistic assignment, insofar as the humanities study art. But like its objects of study, this project doesn't stop at aesthetics. The book follows artworks from a first—arresting—moment of surprise and pleasure, through hybrid improvisations, into institutional change. It hopes to revive a lapsed expectation that the humanities will train judgment and admiration (the basic sentiment of citizenship, as I have learned from Mockus) for the work of art in the world. Though all scholars would do well to consider art's ripple effects, humanists can fulfill a special mission to keep aesthetics in focus, to linger over the charmed moment of disinterested pleasure that enables new accords. More practical people may rush past pleasure as if it derailed progress; they are haunted, it seems, by a Weberian superstition that defers enjoyment indefinitely in the name of productivity.

Art, of course, has no obligation to be constructive, or to be good or bad, ethically speaking. And politically, artists can be progressive, regressive, or in between.¹⁰ Not necessarily useful or useless, art is instead provocative, a bit ungovernable, with a loose-canon kind of energy. It excites many and varied interpretive approaches, and critics are free to choose among them, unless extra-artistic considerations interfere. Were the already war-torn world not in urgent need of constructive interventions, and were explosive tensions not pointing towards more conflict (about race, gender, class, religion, language, borders, water, oil), cultural agency might not occupy my interpretive efforts. In happier circumstances, the arts projects featured here would not even have developed, since they respond to apparently incorrigible conditions. But here they are—intrepid projects that interrupt conditions that burden ethics and irritate artists in ways that stimulate creativity. I invite you to share some of the burden and the excitement, to accompany the brilliant moves that cross and double cross nervous checkpoints between art and everything else.

Like Lucy Lippard's essays, which shared revolutionary ambitions with lead artists among New York's Conceptualists, *Ripple Effects* keeps company with masterful projects to discover patterns that can perhaps be models for creative apprenticeship.¹¹ And like John Dewey's pragmatism that identified democratizing dimensions of art as experience, the book acknowledges the creative contributions of many active citizens, from philosophers of aesthetics to vegetable farmers on urban rooftops. But staying close to the masters will offer ambitious agents useful distillations of brilliant trial and error. The

proximity may also spike humanist interpretation to risk more reflection and creativity. Admirable arts projects consider, for example, how the public may respond. Shouldn't the question also help to shape interpretation? If humanists ask after art's processes, it makes sense to pause along with artists to consider the effects of teaching.¹²

Reflecting on my own practice began when I noticed how many talented students leave literature to pursue something "useful" (economics, politics, medicine). Bereavement is a familiar feeling for humanists, and it made me wonder why we are left behind. Is what we teach useless? But literature and other arts obviously shape desires and assumptions. At the core of human practices—from nation building to health care, intimate relationships to human rights—art and interpretation affect practical interests and explore innovation. The dynamic doesn't stop with historical examples, but offers opportunities for constructive interventions today. None of this seemed obvious to students who abandoned the humanities to do more practical work, maybe because art's ripple effects are not yet a core concern for a field that remains skeptical and pessimistic.

Though pessimism has been intellectually gratifying in a world where, admittedly, disparities grow, wars multiply, and natural resources wane, an optimism of the will is what drives life toward social commitments and creative contributions.¹³ Teaching despair to young people seemed to me not only tedious but irresponsible, compared to making a case for cultural agents. They are fascinating master artists. And saying master in Spanish—*maestro*—which means both artist and teacher, encouraged me to risk some creativity in teaching lessons about literature. I developed an arts-based literacy program for underserved communities that uses literary classics as pre-texts for making a painting, a poem, or a piece of music. Whether the workshops are for grade-school children or for graduate student assistants, participants experience how close creativity comes to critical thinking. Literary theory is now a pleasurable reflection on art-making.

Another experiment is a course in Harvard's General Education curriculum on "Cultural Agents." It hosts a series of speakers who combine art with other professions (medicine, law, business, engineering, and government) to do admirable work.¹⁴ A medical doctor and photographer "falls in love again" with her patients through the portraits she takes; a human rights lawyer turns to landscape art to create a sustainable alternative to drug-dealing; a biochemical engineer invents an art-science laboratory to signal that the two activities go together. The course includes a "fair" where local artist-activists and students pitch problems to each other, form collectives and co-design in-

interventions in, for example, law reform, or the distribution of local produce, or racial profiling, date rape, energy conservation, etc.

Humanities-inspired adventures like these are restructuring curricula in Public Humanities programs, and also in medical schools and in distinguished business schools, where management turns out to be as much an art as a science.¹⁵ Evidently, the humanities have important work to do in these and other collaborations throughout universities and civic institutions that count on the creative imagination to develop effective practices. And the field needs more friends among scientists and policy makers in order to co-design and realize those developments.

Civic life depends on humanistic training to develop judgment—also known as taste in the language of aesthetics. This training is what humanists do; it amounts to educating modern subjects to think freely. The work is an extension of teaching admiration for beauty and art, along with care for the world that art constructs and enhances. Therefore, interpreting art, appreciating its power to shape the world, can spur and support urgent change. This is not a deviation from humanistic attention to the mechanisms of art production and reception. It is an extension and a homecoming to civic education. We can perhaps apprentice ourselves to artist-interventionists to recover hybrid practices with partners outside the academy to improvise alternative scenarios to the tragic demise of the humanities.

All of us are cultural agents: those who make, comment, buy, sell, reflect, allocate, decorate, vote, don't vote, or otherwise lead social, culturally constructed lives. The appropriate question about agency is not if we exercise it, but how intentionally we do so; that is, to what end and what effect. Agent is a term that acknowledges the small shifts in perspective and practice that Antonio Gramsci described as a war of position in which organic intellectuals—including artists and interpreters—lead the charge toward collective change.¹⁶ It won't do to stay wrapped in romantic projections in which art replaces real life. Nor does it make sense to stop dreaming entirely and stay stuck in cynicism. Between frustrated fantasies and despair, agency is a modest but relentless call to creative action, one small step at a time.

Go

For readers who may bristle at the boundaries where art meets accountability, zealous to keep at least art free from instrumental purpose, I'll beg some indulgence and ask you to continue until, perhaps, the historical connections between humanism and public life, or the renewed possibility of central billing for arts and interpretation, or a few fascinating nomadic

projects, persuade a change of heart. In what follows, the chapter "Art and Accountability" takes a backward glance to reconnect humanists to civic education through the link of taste/judgment. Then "Play-Drive in the Hard-Drive: Schiller and Company" adds a bit of theory to trace back and project forward a scholarly field of cultural agency marked by points of contact between aesthetic and political innovation. "Press Here" makes that contact by featuring relentless grass roots projects that "melt-up" from the sparks of a particular art intervention to ignite large-scale social effects, as in the works of Boal, ACT UP, and the Pro-Test Lab.¹⁷ The following chapter, "From the Top," presents arts projects inspired by high-ranking political leaders, including Antanas Mockus, Edi Rama, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, that extend to broad bases of artist-citizens. The book ends with "Pre-Texts," an account of my apprenticeship in the theory and practice of cultural agents.

These pages are a work in progress that—with your help—can develop understanding and promote the constructive work of art and aesthetic education. They remain open to your criticism and contributions, including nominations of exemplary cultural agents. This is a "Beta" or experimental version of the project, open to commentary and criticism, as Boal said of his experiment with *Legislative Theater*.¹⁸ He asked readers to send in responses to his postal address. Following his lead, once again, I invite you to send suggestions for updates of *Ripple Effects* by email to Cultural Agents, cultagen@fas.harvard.edu.

And now, if you want to fast forward to some issues in this book and defer others, you can press ahead selectively as Boal instructed his readers to do, though that menu has obviously changed to this one:

For English, stay tuned; para español presione a un traductor.

If you want, useful humanism, press 1;

- aesthetic education, press 2;

- bottom up interventions, press 3;

- top down creativity, press 4;

- to do something practical, press 5;

- to talk to the operator, press dsommer@fas.harvard.edu.

In all cases, press here, wherever, because the lines will ultimately connect if you keep pressing.

Endnotes

- 1 Futurists experimented with interactive theater too, though their fascist-leaning politics were very different from Boal's. Yet the formal provocation, inviting the audience to intervene, created unanticipated democratizing moments. In a similar line, fascist Pirandello removed the "fourth wall" of the theater (though he didn't invite changes in the script) and loosened the structures of authority. Even right-wing theater, when it risks formal innovation, can have progressive ripple effects. I thank Francesco Erspamer for this reflection.
- 2 Marshal Ganz develops Martha Nussbaum's point about emotion being at the core of moral choices in "Leadership, Organization, and Social Movements" pp. 509-550. p. 516. For Ganz, Boal — the 'joker' or facilitator — is a leader, a role that demands creativity (Ganz p. 531). But Jacques Rancière questions the entire premise of interactive theater in "The Emancipated Spectator," *ArtForum*, 3-2007: "We don't need to turn spectators into actors. We do need to acknowledge that every spectator is already an actor in his own story and that every actor is in turn the spectator of the same kind of story." The conclusion follows from research on workers in the 1840s whose leisure time makes them spectators, and therefore equal to privileged citizens. "The chronicle of their leisure entailed a reframing of the very relationship between doing, seeing, and saying. By becoming 'spectators,' they overthrew the given distribution of the sensible, which had it that those who work have no time left to stroll and look at random, that the members of a collective body have no time to be 'individuals.' This is what emancipation means: the blurring of the opposition between those who look and those who act."
- 3 I am indebted to Diana Taylor and the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics for inducting me into a Boal workshop and inspiring our collaborations.
- 4 Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Aesthetics*.
- 5 General Director of UNESCO, Irina Bukova. Address at the JFK, November 3, 2010.
- 6 See *PMLA* May 2010, with Berube, etc. A Public Humanities collective was constituted at Duke University in April, 2011, and includes several distinguished leaders in the field: Srinivas Aravamudan, Ian Baucom, James Chandler, Jan Cohen-Cruz, Debjani Ganguly, Eileen Gilooly, Sara Guyer, Daniel Herwitz, Gregory Jay, Lee Medovoi, David Shumway, and Kathleen Woodward.
- 7 Silla Vacía (un blog de política súper bueno de Juanita León, autora de *No somos machos*, pero somos muchos, en el que le dedica todo un capítulo a Antanas) sobre Mockus en el que lo llaman, nada menos, que "El político artista". <http://www.lasillavacia.com/historia/10046>.
- 8 See Mockus's "Culture of Citizenship" and Edi Rama's painting the town of Tirana in Chapter Four [of Sommer's forthcoming book *Ripple Effects*]; and Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed and José Abreu's "Sistema" for massive musical education in Chapter Three.
- 9 Randy Martin argues in general that the arts "have much to teach us . . . about the very nature of what we take *public* to mean." See Mary Schmidt Campbell and Randy Martin, editors, *Artistic Citizenship: A Public Voice for the Arts* (2006), 12. The book takes stock of NYU's department of Art and Public Policy.
- 10 Communist André Breton and fascist sympathizer Salvador Dalí both identified as Surrealists, along with anarchists and reformists. Mary Anne Cawes underlines the dual focus for Surrealists, on imagination as well as conventional politics. It was the reason for Breton's fall out with the Communist Party: "Breton never ceased to emphasize the need for a concurrent revolution of the mind: this was the goal and central focus of the surrealist adventure. His refusal to comply with the subservience expected by the self-proclaimed official revolutionary party was to bring him into direct conflict with that party's minions—at times some of his former closest friends" (<http://www.studiocleo.com/librarie/breton/bretonbiography.html>).
- 11 Lucy Lippard (born 1937 in New York City) is an internationally known writer, activist and curator from the United States. Lippard was among the first writers to recognize the de-materialization at work in conceptual art and was an early champion of feminist art. A parallel with fellow travelers in surrealism.
- 12 See David Damrosch, *We Scholars*, an invitation for more collaboration inside the academy.
- 12 A reference to Gramsci's contrast between pessimism of reason and optimism of the will.
- 14 Taught with Francesco Erspamer, with assistance from Jose Falconi.
- 15 See Lane Wallace, "Multicultural Critical Theory. At B-School?" *NYT Business Section*, Jan 9, 2010 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/10/business/10mba.html>): "Learning how to think critically—how to imaginatively frame questions and consider multiple perspectives—has historically been associated with a liberal arts education, not a business school curriculum, so this change represents something of a tectonic shift for business school leaders. . . 'What's different about design thinking is, it's focused on taking that understanding you have about the world and using that as a set of insights from which to be creative.' Instead of presenting existing problems to analyze or solve, design-thinking classes send students to do something akin to anthropological field work to find the problems. Then they field-test solutions, refining as they go."
- 16 See Chapter 1 and also Douglas North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1990); also his "A Transaction Cost Theory of Politics," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 1990, 2 (4): 355-367.
- 17 Douglas Rushkoff, *How the World Became a Corporation and How to take it Back* (Random House, 2009), "The Melt-Up" is his title for Chapter 9, p. 227.
- 18 Augusto Boal, *Legislative Theater: Using performance to make politics*, (London: Routledge, 1998), XIII: "after your first reading, send your impressions, comments, suggestions, additions, propositions, desires to: Augusto Boal, Rua Francisco Otaviano, 185/41, CEP 22080-040, Ipanema-Arpoador, Rio de Janeiro RJ, Brazil."